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ABSTRACT

Several positive actions important to planning and implementing an open-space school on the primary, middle, or secondary level are suggested. The suggestions concern a) the purpose for creating an open-space school, b) staff development and curriculum planning, c) specialized training for administrative staff, d) staff development or curriculum development workshops for potential faculty members, e) the need for a unified philosophy and statement of goals and functions, f) provision of adequate time for curriculum development, g) the need for a student development week at the start of school, h) the encouragement of community involvement, and i) the need for evaluation every month or six weeks. The appendix presents problems posed by open-space facilities. (MJM)

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DEVELOPING PEOPLE FOR OPEN-SPACE SCHOOLS

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On Tuesday, September 7, 1971, the doors at Samuel Jackson Middle School opened to pupils and teachers for the first time. Parents, children, teachers, and administration gazed with pride, awe and a little apprehension at the new facility with its brightly colored walls, open space, "miles" of carpet, modern furniture and gleaming fixtures. The entire community had long awaited this new building with its hints and promises of "great things" to come.

Sam Jackson School had been planned with great care. It's faculty and administration had carefully been selected from among the most successful teachers and administrators available in the system. Faculty members had spent four weeks during the summer discussing and preparing curriculum guides, developing new instructional materials and getting to know each other. When the doors of Samuel Jackson School swung open on September 7, an atmosphere of excitement and eagerness prevailed.

By November 15, 1971, four members of the twenty-two member staff had resigned. Three others were threatening to do so, a guidance counselor was hospitalized with an attack of ulcers, and the principal was wondering why he had ever considered his present position. Attendance statistics showed an average daily absence of 18 percent. Vandalism in the form of building damage and disfigurement was already creating a problem, and several parents had requested transfer of their children to more traditional schools. In short, Samuel Jackson School, the potential beacon light of the system, was in serious trouble.

Perhaps, you've heard of Samuel Jackson School or another like it. Maybe you have even had the tragic and frustrating experience of working in such a school. Perhaps, you are now involved in planning, opening, or making an open-space school "go." If so, you wonder, "What went wrong at Samuel Jackson? What could have been done to prevent the problems? What can we do to see that it doesn't happen to us?"

There is no pat answer or panacea for the Samuel Jackson situation, but this writer's experiences suggest several avenues of action which may be important to planning, and implementing an open-space school-primary, middle or secondary.

1. Don't plan an open-space school merely for the sake of having one. Open-space schools are the current fad, but such a facility may not meet the needs of your students, your community or the professional educators who will be working within its walls. Decide on open-space only after careful consideration is given to the alternatives. Community members, teachers, administrators and students should all be involved in the discussion and decision-making. Once the decision is made, however, be sure to
2. Begin staff development and curriculum planning early. At least one full year of lead time (time prior to school opening) is needed for staff to find common ground from which to work, restructure their thinking and their teaching styles to the demands of the open-space facility, and develop a curriculum suitable to students and building. Actually, a year is not long enough to accomplish all that is necessary, but this may be a realistic time perspective, given the problems and restraints operating in most school systems.

Staff development begins with the process used to select both teachers and administrators.

3. Administrative staff (at least the principal) must have specialized training for and/or experience in open-space shcools. It is a sad but true fact that many potentially good programs in open-space facilities are ruined by administrators who cannot reconceptualize the roles of students, teachers or themselves as demanded by the open environment. The age-old business of "Who's in line for the next promotion or the next new building?" just won't do here. Politics, tenure (length of service) and the rest have to go out the window when selecting the principal of the open-space school, or it will probably fail.

4. Hold a staff development or curriculum development workshop for pctential faculty members more than a year in advance. The primary purposes of this two or three-week intensive workshop (probably a summer venture) will be to 1) acquaint potential staff with the demands of open-space facilities[1], 2) develop a working philosophy and a set of goals and functions upon which further staff selection and curriculum development activities can be based, 3) give potential staff members and administrators opportunity to request either inclusion or exclusion from this new school as philosophy and goals are mutually derived, personalities and viewpoints are uncovered, and the unique elements of the situation are made clear.

Obviously, no teacher, counselor, custodian, clerk, aide or other person

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[1]See Appendix A for a brief description of several problems posed by the open-space facility.

should be arbitrarily assigned to an open-space school. Staff members should be selected on the basis of their desire to be part of this new and innovative situation, but sometimes the temptation of a new building, new equipment, carpeting, a supposedly better situation is too much for many of us to withstand. Every staff member entering an open-space school must do so with understanding of what lies ahead, what the demands will be, and he must be committed to the concept, philosophy, goals and practices defined for the situation, if the school is to succeed at all, for how "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3).

Selection of participants for this initial workshop must be made carefully. Those asked to attend should understand that their selection does not mean assignment to the new school unless 1) they are clearly in agreement with the philosophy which emerges from the workshop, and 2) they request the assignment. However, no person asked to attend the workshop should be arbitrarily excluded from a position in the new school once his philosophic agreement is clear, and he makes the request. To make such an exclusion will create immediate loss of faith among potential staff.

From this initial workshop, a nucleus of staff should emerge. At this point, a major factor in selection of additional staff members will be their agreement with the derived philosophy and goals upon which curriculum, school organization, and all else will be based.

5. Develop a unified philosophy and a statement of goals and functions, and be sure that all constituencies agree to both principles and practices. It has already been suggested that a major focus of the initial staff development workshop should be definition of philosophy

and delineation of school goals and functions. It is essential that workshop participants (potential staff members), central office administration, community and students reach consensus on these documents and the principles and practices stated or implied therein. All parties must be willing to commit themselves to implementing and preserving these basic concepts in all matters pertaining to the school. Communication with and involvement of the various interest groups must accompany the workshop (although not necessarily be a part of it), if acceptance and commitment are to result.

6. Provide adequate time for curriculum development. The first phase in developing curriculum is complete with the definition of philosophy goals and functions (What do we believe? Where should we go?), but the delineation of instructional goals (How should we organize?), instructional strategies (What learning opportunities are needed?), measurement and evaluation techniques (Have we gotten there? How well have we done?) yet remains. It will take more than two or three, or four weeks of intensive effort to complete these phases, particularly since each new development must be tested against philosophy and goals. Indeed, faculty must be involved for the better part of a year at minimum in developing plans and materials. Release time from current teaching responsibilities and other professional duties must be provided for at least some of this work. The task is too big, the effort needed too great to trust to after-school and Saturday meetings when teachers are physically and mentally exhausted.
7. Don't neglect staff development, phase two. While a great deal of staff development takes place in the initial workshop and in curriculum

development activities, some further activity during the summer preceding the opening of school undoubtedly will reap many rewards. A one or two-week workshop at this point in time might bring back into focus the problems of communication (verbal and nonverbal) in the open-space school, human relations needs, teacher-pupil relationships, final preparations for teaming or other instructional innovations, organizational arrangements, and planning for the introduction of students to the school and program.

8. Make the first week of school a time for student development. Forget about teaching content for a week or so. Remember that staff has spent more than a year in planning and preparation. We can't expect students to be ready just because we are. They, too, need a time for planning, preparation, adjustment, thinking. A week spent in "rap sessions," investigation of environment, restructuring of human relationships or whatever may be the key to successful teaching and learning in the weeks and months to follow. Of course, students have been involved in planning activities all along the way, but not all students and not all together in this new environment at one time.

9. Remember community involvement all along the way. If parents are involved in curriculum planning, if somehow they can be involved in many of the aspects of staff development, if their thinking and their skills are built into program, if they can be directly a part of some of the student development activities, this will be a different, a unique school because of it. After all, parents

are teachers, (and learners), too.

10. Stop every month or six weeks and conduct an evaluation. During the first year of operation (and thereafter, too), cancel all classes for a day at regular intervals. Sit down with students and parents and central office staff and school board members and rap awhile. Conduct an informal (but not unstructured) evaluation of what's happening, where we're going, what we think? The time spent will be well worthwhile.

These suggestions have not been intended to be all-inclusive, nor are they sacred doctrine for developing an open-space school. However, they just might have averted some of the problems at Samuel Jackson School.

APPENDIX A

PROBLEMS POSED BY OPEN-SPACE FACILITIES

An open-space building is not the same as the traditional school building of the past thirty years. Open-space facilities pose some interesting problems which must be considered because of their very existence.

1. A UNIQUE COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT.

You can't talk at learners in the same way in an open-space school. To whatever degree lecture is an effective instructional tool in a closed-classroom, it is so because of the isolated nature of the setting. In open-space, lecturing to a group of twenty-five or thirty students is ineffective, unimaginative and chaos-producing. Imagine six teachers and their "classes" spread around a huge room with lecture going in each group. It's enough to make anyone nervous.

A significant aspect of communication is the nonverbal dimension. The uses we make of time, space, color, decor and light all communicate to people. In an open-space situation, many environmental messages are sent to learners (and staff) which might go unnoticed or which might not be present in a traditional classroom setting. In addition, human elements of nonverbal communication (facial expression, eye contact, gestures, postures, vocal characteristics) are changed significantly in the open-space structure. Some are lost in the vastness of the open-space. Others are heightened in this environment.

People (staff and students) are all open to inspection in the open-space setting. Our communication behaviors are observable by everyone even at a distance. The demands of communication in the open-space setting may be the most significant problem of all.

2. NEED FOR AN "ACTIVE" CURRICULUM

Everything about the open-space facility tells learners that they can and should move about, talk to each other, be actively engaged rather than respond passively to teacher, situation and environments. An "active" classroom will result whether we build such a program or not. Would it not be better to have congruency of program and situation?

3. CONCERN FOR "CHARACTER-DEVELOPMENT" VERSUS "CONTENT-EMPHASIS."

Open-space suggests socialization, social relationships, independence and other character-development considerations. For a content-oriented teacher or staff, a problem of emphasis, focus, evaluation may soon surface. The problem of content versus character emphasis should be dealt with early.